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Pallor/Love/Art

Leonard Wallace Robinson

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Pallor/Love/Art

Ditha's dramatic paleness continues to affect the sculptor, Lanahan, profoundly. The whiteness of her skin and its texture seem to him above human, outside of it, almost mythical, as though marble and flesh had been joined in her. Her voice affects him strangely, too, that is when it is raised in complaint, an octave higher than her normal voice, as it often is. It's as though she were singing to him.

There are five around the table for this Christmas dinner at the Lanahans, and Ditha, the stranger, has made herself the centerpiece of the talk, as though she were the hostess and responsible. She is describing the house the Art Institute has assigned her to in her careful, imprecise English and with the attention to detail that makes her at one and the same time the sharp observer and the lyrical complainer; lyrical to Lanahan's mind anyhow, although Margaret, his wife, he feels, is probably hearing only the disembodied complaint, to judge by the listening cock of her head to the left, slight smile, too-patient silence.

"This house of mine is sustained by the valence within it," Ditha says, "or rather I mean the plural of valence. Valencies? Yes, valencies float it and it stands up. Like balloons they float it. In this house you have given to me—" (she looks across the table in mock asperity at Lanahan, a humorous frown, then shifts it to the two others, Jenny Wu and Martin Seeley, who, with Lanahan, had awarded her the Institute Fellowship that had brought her from Macedonia) "these valencies are all of Scottish plaids, one plaid for each valence. A differing plaid is on the windowsill in the bedroom, one around the frame of this bed, one around the whole room and even a special plaid around the seat of the commode in the W.C." She actually pronounces it 'Wobble-u.C.' and they all laugh a little, out loud, and she nods, admitting her error but pleased at their laughter. "Also these valencies are all most faded." She pauses. "Why plaid? I ask myself. The landlady who lives in the next door is of the name Zombrowska. This is not the Scottish name, no? Am I in mistake?"

She looks at each of them in turn with her question, rotating her head, her dark-blue eyes wide. Lanahan finds her humor in curious contrast to her great beauty, like a bulb on in daylight, but they all laugh with her and Jenny Wu says: "It reminds me of a film I saw of Emory Dickerson. The film—it was made by the Anguish Department at—."

"Anguish Department!" Margaret bursts in on Jenny, her voice incredulous, almost angry. "What's *that*?"

"English Department, of course," Martin Seeley answers, looking down his long hawk nose in mock hauteur at Margaret, his corrugated brow and the heavily indented wrinkles around his mouth give his small head a finial-like look.

But Margaret and Jenny Wu are old friends. In fact Margaret has given Jenny—the resident Orientalist at the Art Institute for the past decade—endless informal drills at this very same dining room table over the years, hammering at her *rs* and *ls*. Jenny has now turned her eyes to the ceiling as if caught red-handed by her teacher.

"And what's a *film* And who in hell is Emory Dickerson?" Margaret now says. "It's perfectly clear," Martin Seeley says. "A *film* of the life of *Emily Dickinson*."

"Thank God for you," Margaret says to him. "Emory Dickerson. It sounded so

familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I thought I might be going mad." She looks fondly at Jenny who is now rocking with silent laughter, her eyes glistening like distant perch behind her thick glasses in the heavy tortoiseshell frames.

"Tower of Babel," Lanahan says. He quickly glances at Ditha, afraid she might have taken some offense at his remark. But she only continues to look pleasant and puzzled at once by the whole exchange, the in-group joking totally lost on her. She looks as patient as the Cnidean goddess, sure that all things will turn back to her, as they will, Lanahan knows.

What Lanahan is living for now is the end of the day, the moment when it will be time to take Ditha home through the snowstorm that is going on outside as he had brought her here through it earlier. This end looms for him, a pleasure dome in a field of terror. He is sixty-three and he has never once in their thirty years of marriage—incredible Southampton legend—been actually unfaithful to Margaret. But there's no cure for it. No turning back now; no will to. Clear commitments will be made between him and Ditha as the car slithers down their tunnel of snowflakes on the way to her house. The confessions of lovers. Promises. The kind that are unbreakable. Vows. The kind that have to be kept. At least with Ditha they'll have to be kept. No problem for him. Their life will start at the end of that aery tunnel.

Jenny Wu's thought on Emily Dickinson has drifted away but she is now telling a long shocking story about the National Endowment for the Arts, doing well with the *Is* and *rs*, while Margaret nods approvingly like an amiable mobile and Ditha looks abstractedly through her pallor toward the turkey on the serving table next to Margaret, her head tipped to one side enchantingly. When he takes Ditha home later, Lanahan is thinking, he'll telephone Margaret from Ditha's house—Ditha's house on that snowy pedestal overlooking the ocean. He is stuck in the snow, he'll say to Margaret. The tow will be there in a half hour, he'll tell her. The simple lie is so vivid, so present, that he feels he must guard against forming the words with his lips and suddenly sees, clear as day, his single-figure *Secrete En Marbre* in the courtyard at the Modern, the turn of its neck confessing the secret it's hiding; that left hand should slant more—too perpendicular to the ground, honest, direct; wants to be slyly gliding . . . He'll be home in two hours he'll tell Margaret. At most three. Time enough for him and Ditha. All could be arranged in three hours. All that had to be. He'd find a way not to hurt Margaret. He'll see to it that she—the snagging reef disappears quickly under the noisy eddy of his plans.

He tries not to look at Ditha too much during the meal. But he misses nothing. He notices she is not eating the turkey or the stuffing on her plate, only the vegetables. If he were allowed to he'd keep his eyes fixed on the white miracle of her skin, the small dark shadows under her eyes, the infinitesimal swelling of her upper lip, that curious thickness he'd never seen in a beautiful woman before. How could one make that small thickness grow out of the pallor? Alabaster do it? No. God no! Ivory. It had to be ivory. The slight creamy swelling like a shadow of itself would sink back into itself in alabaster. It *had* to be ivory.

The storm in the great window behind Ditha was a backdrop against which he could watch the sharp outlines of her touching elegance, the even beauty of her face, its desperate whiteness, the wanting in the small thickness of her lip.

But the feelings toward her were not only because of her outside beauty. The skids had been greased for him before he'd even laid eyes on her. Her talent. He'd gone for her sculpture like a fish for a minnow when he'd come up to it in the international competition. She'd had four pieces among the seventy to be judged after the preliminary cullings had been made. Lanahan and the two other final

judges—this year Jenny Wu and Martin Seeley—had gone slowly and silently down the rows of sculptures, ten rows, each representing a nation; seven sculptures in each row. Seeley, looking at Lanahan after the first four rows had shaken his head in despair, opening his exophthalmic eyes and turning the corner of his mouth down in his thin, lined face to mimic the tragic mask perfectly. The thing was a disaster, a total waste of government money, of their time, everybody's effort.

And then they came to the Yugoslavian exhibition and Ditha's entries; from the state of Macedonia in Yugoslavia. The three judges walked right past it and then Lanahan turned back, a second after Martin had, checking what they could barely credit in sequential double takes. And then Jenny Wu joined them, her moon-shaped yellow face nodding 'yes' eagerly. There were two chaste pieces of white marble and one of granite and the fourth piece of ivory. The stones were, clearly, found in the field, each barely touched by the chisel, the inner being of each evoked rather than wrought. And the ivory piece—a large piece for ivory, three feet tall—exactly the opposite, heavily, beautifully wrought, totally the sculptor's, as if it had never existed in nature.

Hers were the only acceptable sculptures they found too. They had refused to pick anyone else and Ditha had become the lone recipient of the international fellowship this year. Ditha Zaidik.

Margaret had liked Ditha. She had met her before Lanahan had. Lanahan had had to miss the reception for the Macedonian winner at the Institute's school in Southampton in early December and had asked Margaret to stand in for him, and Margaret had invited Ditha to have Christmas dinner with them. She always invited an artist who was away from home, for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Lanahan had rolled his eyes and said: "Why invite the competition. Talented youth. God."

"You love to play the archbishop," she said.

"It wears thin very quickly." He looked at her, stroking his reddish pepper and salt beard. "Is she good-looking at least?"

She had looked at him, her head cocked. "All twenty-five-year-olds look good at your age."

"We don't to them though," he said. "Young artists hate the old and communists hate the rich." He looked at her and smiled. "Well, in this setting I *look* rich," he said.

"You are," she said. "Face it. But young Ditha is not by any stretch of the imagination a communist. You'll see."

He thought for a moment. Then he nodded in agreement. "No, she couldn't be," he said. He was thinking of the heavily wrought ivory piece mainly, its sensual richness.

But the excitement Ditha's work had raised in him had been only the faintest foreshadowing of the event proper. The major motif had started with the Christmas day snowstorm—two hours before he was supposed to go get her. It had begun promptly at eleven; heavy snow, huge flakes. He watched it for an hour from the great windows in the dining room as Margaret and Mrs. Hendry—who'd come in to help—went back and forth from the open kitchen preparing the table and the room. Fantastically heavy. It came down in great white curtains. As though the world were breaking up; so heavy you could only see the individual flakes when they flew across his window in the updrafts under the low eaves. At some point as he watched he flicked on the bright lights he had had built into the heavily timbered long overhang of the eaves and it made the flakes close to the house look even bigger, as big as playing cards, as though with a flick he had extended their nature, transformed it. Too, he loved the pale ivory of artificial light mixed with sunlight.

The snow was so thick now that he could only make out patches of the young dogwood close to the window. He couldn't see any of the other trees in the great field. The driving snow plastered itself like a coat of thin wet rabbit fur against the dogwood's slender frame, making it whiter now than it would be in bloom. The ground snow was already piling up toward its waist, a giant skirt heavy as the world.

Watching the storm through the window had laid a deep quiet on Lanahan; the kind work on stone brought him when he was far along with a piece and when all was going beautifully with it; the hand and mind moved along under a spell, in blind sureness, mesmerically, each white chip exposing more of the object hiding under them, the thing he was after. There came the solemn sureness as you approached the sovereign mystery, uncovering it. Opposite of snowing though. Snowflakes created the mystery seen. Objects were armatures for snow. Same quiet in both though; same excitement.

Margaret sent him to pick Ditha up at twelve thirty. She gave him scrupulous directions, allowing an hour for each way because of the storm, though Ditha's house was only five miles away.

"What'll I talk to her about?" he said just outside the door. He was grinning. She was a little taller than he—five feet nine but their faces had the same fiddle shape.

"Just be brittle," she said. He laughed out loud and kissed her on her olive cheek. The snow had already begun to wet his beard, and she shivered a little at the cold wetness on her skin.

But the drive down the tunnel of snowflakes deepened the spell his watching from the window had put him under. It was as though now he had joined the snow, was part of it. All the sensations of coasting or skiing, except the cold wind.

He knew Beach Street in Severy between Southampton and Shinnecock but not the end the number Margaret had given him led to, not the fact that Beach Street changed without warning from being the main thoroughfare in tiny Severy, rid itself of its houses and turned itself into a narrow, almost houseless, peninsula. The few houses were right on the ocean now. Each had its mailbox and each mailbox was clearly numbered—each mailbox face in the lee of the wind—but when he came to 308 he was absolutely sure the beach house he could make out on the small hill there could not be the one they had put Ditha in. He was certain he had made a wrong turning, that he was lost. The house could not be the right one. Why would the Institute put her way out here? An alone woman. The next place was too far away to be seen through the slanting snowfall. Could be a quarter of a mile away. Ditha would have no car. How did they think she could get to the school? The workshop? He sat in blank puzzlement looking up through his side window at the great flakes slanting darkly down on the small house. Couldn't be her house.

He was lost all right. Even parked like this the snow still tunnelled toward him, opening up as it hit the car; the feeling was an eerie one, as though he were actually moving down a mysterious avenue, borne down it willessly, to some mysterious destination. Or perhaps to none. If he were lost it wasn't his fault. Therefore nobody would know if he were lost an extra five minutes. He turned the motor off now and listened to the vast drifting silence outside and himself drifting within. If one were to drift happily ever after, this passage through eternal snow would be bearable, even fine and good, once wants were subtracted. Wants were the whole heavy weight. If he were being carried up he'd be out over the Atlantic now, *A Paladin In A Palanquin*. The title of Martin Seeley's Rodin Prize sculpture entered his mind a split second before a sharp vision of the sculpture itself emerged, the blind face of the Paladin in black basalt looking unseeingly out of a window in a large block of black stone borne up by two huge stylized wings in bas relief

along its side. The wings were magnificent, a black snowstorm bearing one—

When he turned his head slightly he was not surprised to see the face against the driver's window of his car or to see at once how beautiful it was; her paleness in that white storm made her part of it, her presence somehow expected. And her concerned, apologetic smile, her head to one side bending toward her left shoulder in concerned inquiry, her brow with its horizontal worry lines questioning her intrusion—all seemed to suggest at once that her beauty could belong to him if only he could assure her that she had not startled him. And so did her first words when he quickly opened the door.

"Oh, Mr. Chairman," she said, stepping back to let him out as he struggled up from the driver's seat, even reaching her hand out as if to take his hand, to help him. "I had not known in any way you were here. I have been ready for long but had not looked out the window for the several of minutes."

He felt no inclination to laugh inwardly at the "Mr. Chairman," but her presence, something about her whole being slightly dizzied him, as though the tunnel of snow down which he had been flying had indeed brought him to a dream destination, transporting him to, say, a snow-blown *dacha* on the Baltic to take over his new role as a Party leader. Mr. Chairman!

Her coat had an outdated foreign look, the thin brown fur as tight and form-fitting as a cloth coat down to the waist and then flouncing in a dirndl flare-out at the hips, an almost balletic look. And the startling red beret hitched slightly to the front and left as though she were proclaiming her inner being and political faith at once, ironically contrasting them perhaps. He did take her offered hand in getting out and he felt as he did so as if they were, together, starting the opening movement in a ballet; a fairy tale of course; Lanahan and the Snow Princess. Old Lanahan and the gamin princess with the jaunty red beret cocked over her left eye. "The Snow Princess finds Old Lanahan lost in the whirling snowstorm and offers to lead him to her—"

Once outside and standing next to her in the swirling snow he had turned her helping hand into an introduction, a handshake, half-laughing and pumping her hand and saying: "Well, I'm very pleased to meet you Ditha. Ditha?" She nodded. "Of course," he said. "I was sure of it. And I'm John Lanahan."

"Yes," she said. "I know," bobbing her head up and down several times, smiling eagerly, as if to reassure him. She laughed ever so slightly. "And yes, I am certainly Ditha."

Some warm scent came from her and lay on the cold air between them. He did not recognize it. Unknown. "Now we are sure we know each other," she said and she looked at him out of her great eyes as if she hoped the remark pleased him. He looked away as if in confusion and the slanting snow caught him directly in the face, blowing inside his turned up collar. He took hold of the door of the car which he had left open and indicated with his head that she could get in and he said, "You can slip over."

She did not, apparently, understand the idiom 'slip over' and as she got in behind the wheel she said: "You wish me to drive, Mr. Chairman?"

The idea had not remotely occurred to him but he said: "Can you?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "I drive for that Art Council in Berrios." She looked at him. "that is the town in Jugoslavia," she said. "I drive for that Art Council on Tuesdays and Thursdays." She was looking at the wheel and dashboard, testing the shift tentatively.

"Would you like to drive?" he said.

She looked at him from under the slant of her red beret and said: "An American

car," and looked out the windshield down the snowflake tunnel and then back at him, the surprise and pleasure on her face intense, and said simply: "Yes."

Going around the car to get in Lanahan felt he had given her a first gift and wondered dimly what he meant by "first."

She was an excellent driver, went at exactly the right slowness for the snow which now seemed to be following them, going in the same direction as the car and at just a slightly slower speed.

They had been silent. He must tell her very quickly not to call him Mr. Chairman. Margaret, after all. But there was something else entirely going on. In the first mile she had looked at him twice with the same pleasure in her face, unchanging pleasure at her gift from him and she had even wiggled the wheel and opened her eyes wider to tell him again how much she loved it.

He had begun here, but only begun, to realize that her pleasure was bringing him an indescribable sensation. It was new, or from long ago; a kind of unpleasant excitement, overexcitement, like those early feelings the new possibilities of fame gave rise to in him; its first intimations; a tremendous party that was coming up. Joy. Everything was adventure. Glowed from within. But you couldn't stop the excitement. It was too much.

And this led directly, after the first few minutes of total silence between them, to feeling anxious, a curious early kind of anxiety, the kind he'd had when he had to talk to girls, from grammar school on, through college, through the Art Students League; a skinny youth with wide shoulders and too-large hands. Never entirely lost this unease with really beautiful women, even with certain models, though long ago his success had helped him to hide it perfectly; under a patina of ease.

But then Ditha had suddenly started to talk and what she had said had astonished him for a moment: "I do not see, Mr. Chairman, when you were outside my house there," she had gestured back in the direction they had come from and her voice had risen a full octave, "why you did not push your horn signal to tell me of your presence." The octaval jump was the first he had heard of her complaining voice. He looked at her; not a trace of a smile. She was serious. As she looked at him sideways for a second her face registered the faintest—what—annoyance? Yes. Yes. But why?

"I suppose you're right," he had said.

"Yes," she had said quickly. "Or you might have—ah—dismounted from this car and given the bell of the house a—push." Again she looked at him, serious, slightly disapproving, a lecturing tone in her voice.

What in hell was she talking about? "Mr. Chairman." Gratitude. And now quite gratuitous reproof. She was talking about nothing at all. Nothing whatsoever. Nothing connected to nothing. For a moment he felt the keenest indignation reserved largely for certain arguments with Margaret. He looked straight ahead and down the tunnel made by the blowing snow which somehow had reversed its direction again and was blowing against them now rather than with them. Perhaps she was crazy. Many artists, their art aside, are. He'd known plenty. Their art their only anchor in sanity.

He had looked at her just as she took her eyes from the road and now the slightly reproving look was gone as was the small underlying sound of complaint, the heightened pitch in her voice. "Oh, Mr. Chairman," she had said. "I can only say this with such poor words. My Eenglish. I just do not like it at all that I keep you waiting back there." She had gestured again to indicate their starting point. "I am all ready and I keep you waiting outside in the snowstorm. It is so bad." She smiled

ruefully at the contradiction between her readiness and his waiting, a waste, a lost groat, spilled milk, irretrievable.

And in the moment she had spoken and he had seen her smile, something in him had relaxed completely and at the same time had rejoiced. Not for her contrition. That was icing. The cake itself had been, after all, her slight annoyance with him, her reproof of him for what she considered his bungling. The cake had been her complaining voice. It was her gift to him. The voice of safety with the other person. *The voice within a marriage.*

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Margaret had been afraid that even a medium-sized Christmas might be too much for Ditha right now, at the beginning—language difficulties, the blighting shyness of so many young artists, particularly perhaps the most talented. So she had invited only two other guests, Martin Seeley and Jenny Wu who'd come out together from New York City in Martin's car.

But Ditha seemed perfectly at ease from the start at the great round table in the Lanahan's huge dining room with the long windows on the east and the west, one side looking on the land, the other directly on the Atlantic.

Oh Ditha is not just at ease. She is showing she is expert really in the ordinary civilities and countercivilities between hosts and foreign guests and she is not at all overwhelmed, as Margaret had feared she might be, by the size and simple splendors of a successful American artist's combined studio and home joined by a great breezeway with tremendous windows. Lanahan calls it his 'bridge of sighs.'

Ditha subsumes their interest in her far-off country and unfailingly answers their polite questions in depth with the quiet assurance of a guide. No, we do not have turkey in Macedonia for Christmas; we have spitted roast lamb that the papa of each family rises before dawn to start the cooking of over an open fire outside the house. (Lanahan hears the voice now begin to creep up the octave.) We prefer to cook the meat outside of our houses because of the odors caused by the indoor cooking of meat. We do not like that odor. No we never eat goose either. In fact turkey as food is not well-known in Macedonia. Only spitted lamb for Christmas and Easter. Although mostly we do not celebrate these religious festivals. Very few people believe in God or at least admit to such a belief in Yugoslavian Macedonia, unlike the Macedonia of Greece. And the Macedonians of Yugoslavia do not know cranberries but have instead a most very delicious red compote that looks like cranberries but is not at all sweet. It is quite bitter. We do not like the sweet taste with a meat combined. Many of us in very fact do not eat meat at all. We feel meat is not a good thing for us. Many of us Macedonians we are, what do you say, vegetarians? Is this word correct?

Lanahan listens to her voice as he mixes the drinks and as they sit beside the broad flagstones in his vast studio before dinner and then as he carves the turkey at the table afterward in the dining room of the main house. Her answers, each, seem charming and graceful to him. The way she can speak her mind without fear or favor has a naturalness, honesty, force, to him. All part of her talent and of her pale beauty. He could hear the explicit criticism of their food, their manner of preparing it, whatever, certainly, but this honesty of hers, this conviction of rightness, this complaint about reality—he believes these to be gut and sinew of the artist, the true artist, profound dissatisfaction, the need to change the world completely, reshape it, revolutionize it, recarve it, show it what it could, was meant to, be. The complaining voice of the critic had been the opening voice of their love—why

did you not sound that horn, push that bell? Let it remain. He listens to the underlying threnody in her voice as a song sung to himself alone, the plaint, violin, oboe, complaining, calling.

Of course Margaret is not having the same reaction at all. He can see that clearly enough. Her smile is just a little too tight, her eyes a little too wide open. But he can't help it. He hasn't asked for this, for what has happened. He didn't want—he couldn't— He pushes the whole Margaret thing into the back part of his mind by sheer force, the way he would put a stone or piece of wood that was not going the way he'd planned into a dark corner of the studio.

When Ditha is speaking Lanahan tries to listen carefully, imaginatively, so that he can keep the subject going. He asks the kind of question that will keep the talk focused on her, emanating from her as far as that is possible. He does this so he can go on looking at her as much as possible—without arousing Margaret's suspicions.

These maneuvers lead him into a kind of trap. At one point when Martin and Jenny are talking about the connection between modern car design and a certain aspect of Russian Futurism, Lanahan turns to Ditha during the slightest of pauses and says: "What kind of automobile does Yugoslavia make, Ditha?"

She has been silent for quite a while and now she turns her dark blue eyes on him, nodding her head as if to praise the question (but really to thank him, he feels, for including her again, for taking her hand, for bringing her back into the dance).

"We make the Fiat," she says. "It is in agreement with Italy, but we make our own Fiat. I do not think our Fiat would fit in this Russian Futurism thought of Mr. Seeley's." She shook her head and now her voice rises the full octave into her plaint: "I am regretful to say that it is not a good car, that is if we compare him—it—to your American car. It does not steer with so easy. Very hard to steer with in Jugoslavian Fiat. Like a *trok*. Truck." She stops for a moment and when she speaks again her voice has dropped down the octave, to normal. "But here," she says, and gives two long easy circular turns of both of her extended hands to show the ease with which the American steering wheel, compared to the Jugoslavian, turns. And she smiles her small goddess smile right at Lanahan, her pallor luminous; "Here it is so easy and beautiful for the steering."

His heart seizes for a moment in pleasure and fear. Would Margaret notice? (She does.)

"Have you had the chance to drive an American car already?" Margaret says.

Ditha nods eagerly, in all innocence, her eyes lighting with the remembered pleasure. "Oh yes. Your husband had me to drive here from my house. Just before all this."

"I see," Margaret says, smiling slightly. "And I can see you enjoyed it too."

"Oh yes," Ditha says, "very much. Much." She pauses and looks at him complicitly he thinks and now he waits for the change in tone, the now dear complaint, their bridge. "I think though for snowstorms and perhaps for the rainstorms also,"—her voice up the expected octave—"that our window wipers in Jugoslavia are much more—ah—rapid" she pauses and then continues—"and so better than the window wipers here within this country."

Ditha's face and shoulders are framed by the large window and the snowstorm blows in a vast silent slant behind her, seeming in the glare of the outdoor lights hidden under the eaves to veer in a different direction.

The talk at the table swirls around her white presence. Small eddies of what he would say in the car on the way to her house gust through Lanahan's head

whenever he is silent, and a vision of their first embrace outside the car on that small snow-swept height overlooking the sea that her house stood on keeps whirling through his mind—a two-figure group, almost a sea-facing obelisk, the line between them subtle and tight as a lapstrake jointure.

But now, even as they sit there, it happens—the snow stops.

It stops as suddenly as it had begun this morning, almost with a bang. He can see it happening in the short time it takes for Mrs. Hendry to put the plates for the dessert down before them. Perhaps though it hasn't really stopped. Perhaps it is only the eddying of the large flakes that are lighted by the eaves that has stopped; a wind shift. He looks at his wristwatch. Four o'clock and the first faint dye of dusk. Perhaps he just can't see the great flakes. Perhaps they are still slanting by beyond the flood lights, out of the up-eddies near the house, going too fast, or too far away to be seen.

Margaret has gone over to the kitchen at the end of the dining room to get the desserts so he gets up and goes to the window to check the snow. No. The snowing has stopped all right. All but. That suddenly. The flakes, front-lighted from the eaves can be seen clearly and are scant and tiny now; wind gone out of them. Each single flake feathers down listlessly behind the huge pane, vagrant contrails, afterthoughts of the great thing that had passed over. The slender snow-plastered form of the dogwood is all but dimmed out in the purple late-afternoon light from the cloud-banked sun.

When he walks back toward the table he can hear his own voice as if it were an echo. "It's stopped snowing," he says as if he were announcing a death.

Margaret is just arriving from the kitchen carrying a large tray with their dessert as Lanahan says this and she and Martin laugh at his stricken tone. "There'll be plenty of time left for coasting later, dear," she says, mocking the reassuring tone of a mother to a child. Martin laughs again and she puts the tray down on the serving table next to her.

"He wouldn't be so enthusiastic about it if he had to drive back to New York in it," Martin says.

Margaret is offering them a choice of mince, squash, or apple pie with ice cream. Ditha has a second piece of mince and when she is finished Lanahan notices that a dark purple speck has lodged between her two perfect front teeth; raisin skin? What was mince made of? It covers about a third of the left front tooth. He has a fugitive vision of how he could tenderly remove it if they were alone. He would walk over, half-smiling, she watching him, slightly puzzled, but trusting; her left arm is up, wrist bent backward, left leg forward, body half turned to go, half turned to stay.

Margaret says: "We'll have coffee in John's studio. It'll be nicer there by the fireplace." She stands up folding her pumpkin-colored napkin and the rest follow suit and then she says: "Follow me," to them and starts toward the dining room door walking next to Ditha. Halfway there she suddenly turns and says: "Oh John, did you take your—?" She doesn't finish but looks toward him and pats her left breast lightly, her eyes moving quickly to Ditha and then back to him.

Lanahan inhales sharply, frowning at Margaret. "Oh," he says, "I forgot." He reaches into the left breast pocket of his jacket, takes out a small round box and then walks back to where he'd sat at the table and takes two of the tablets, one after the other, washing each down with the lees of the sauterne he had not quite finished at dinner. The others start out and he sees Ditha turn in the doorway and look toward him as he takes the second sip of the cloudy white dregs, and at the same time nod in her polite abstracted way at something Margaret is saying

next to and just in front of her. Probably Margaret's saying: "It's his heart medicine. He always forgets."

He lets them all go ahead with Margaret then and walks over to the large dining room window and looks out at the great field of snow. The sky is cloudless now, bright blue, the late-afternoon sun out in force just above the horizon. It shines on the small undulant line of tiny hills, mere rises really, in the distance. Perfect lighting. Perfect because it was basically a backlight, and he has a sudden sharp picture of the way the permanent frontal spotlight at the Frick shines on the "Mountain," his veined alabaster figure of a giantess. The Frick light was just plain *wrong*. Why had he never *noticed* it? Direct sun destroyed the color in the snow—the purple. A disaster. He stays for several minutes looking out at the backlighted snowscape. Its unmoving late afternoon stillness and the peacefulness fill him with desperation.

When he joins the group in front of the fireplace in the high-ceilinged studio he is not surprised to find that the little speck of raisin skin is still on the upper part of Ditha's front tooth. She and Margaret are standing in front of the fireplace. Martin and Jenny are sitting on the long sofa in front of it. The four of them are having an animated conversation about health foods and vegetarianism. Lanahan sits down next to Martin and looks at Margaret and Ditha standing together. Ditha has been speaking and now she's silent, her head bent back slightly to look up at what Margaret will reply, the profile of her neck and head as beautiful as a Cranach etching of Eve. Her marvelous pallor is lit every so slightly by the fire behind her, rose on marble. His heartbeat moves up again. His "Mountain" should sit next to an open fireplace. No. In front of an open fireplace so the rose of the flame could be a backlight. The right kind of spotlight could do it too. Or the sun—dawn, twilight, no diff. Just *not* the front light they now had.

Margaret is replying to Ditha's remarks on vegetarianism. "Well, I think it is both foolish and dangerous," Margaret is saying. "A friend of ours, a doctor, told us that when he was a resident at Bellevue every vegetarian who turned up there as a patient, had anemia. Every single one."

Ditha looks at Margaret for a long moment, as if making certain of her meaning. "Is this a true fact?" she asks.

"Yes," Margaret says firmly. "It's absolutely true. We're meat-eating animals for heaven's sakes. We get the red corpuscles we need from *meat*, not *vegetables*. Vegetables have no blood in them."

Ditha walks a few steps away from Margaret to the edge of the brick platform that fronts the fireplace. Then she turns and says to Margaret in a slow, wondering voice, "What you are saying concerns the truth." She pauses and looks at Margaret. "The doctor in Macedonia says this to me. 'You have the anemia' he says." Ditha looks up at the ceiling. "I did not believe him," she says.

Margaret is nodding vigorously. "I'm not surprised. You are really *very* pale. I noticed it at once."

Ditha nods. "Yes. He wanted me to eat the liver of an animal," she says. She looks at Margaret: "The little cow." It is almost a question.

"Calf," Margaret says. "Calves' liver."

Ditha nods. "That is it." She gives a small shiver. "I could never do it."

Lanahan hears them, knows exactly what Margaret is doing, but the voice in his own head has suddenly become louder than their voices. His voice is addressing itself to the curator at the Frick. The new one. Lanahan is, in his mind's eye, standing with the new one in front of the Mountain. What was the new one's name—Sisson? Simpson? "Yes," Lanahan's imagined voice is saying: "The best light for a marble like this is in back. A backlight. The stone's so translucent. A frontal light

destroys the purple veins in stone as translucent as this. It makes it look *sickly*. Like plaster or something dying. What you've got to have is firelight perhaps to the left a little, but *behind* to the left. It's got to come from *behind*." The imagined Sisson is nodding his head, smiling intently, in almost fierce agreement. Balzacian face, too large for his frame; pasty; sweaty forehead; probably childhood polio.

*

It isn't long before Martin Seeley says he should start back to New York City. "We might beat some of the traffic if we start now," he says.

"Which way do you go, Martin?" Margaret says now. She glances at Lanahan as she asks the question and he nods almost imperceptibly at her.

"I pick up the route at Riverhead and then right in, over the Triborough," Martin says.

"Oh, perfect," Margaret says. "Ditha's going near Shinnecock. Could you drop her at her house? It's only a mile from Severy Center. On Beach Street."

"Certainly," Martin says. "We'd be glad to."

And that was that.

As the Lanahans say their farewells at Martin Seeley's car in their driveway, Lanahan's eyes do not meet Ditha's once. It is easy to avoid them in the semidark. He is sure there'd be accusation in them though he is faintly surprised that there is no rise, no complaint in her voice when she says her final goodbyes from the car, and thank you, thank you.

Leonard Wallace Robinson